AN: I know I left you on a very nasty cliffhanger – what else is new? – last time, so I'll say very little and just allow you to enjoy the continuing story in this intense drama.

Poison

Rat

"La-la-la-la-la…"

The lion hummed his rather unrehearsed tune mindlessly as he walked through the dimly lit space; there wasn't much else he could do to entertain himself throughout the day, so why not make a little music? It wasn't exactly like he could catch the six o'clock showing of *Scud the Wonder Dog* on TV or anything.

Nope. Life in the lab was boring, and he knew it. Still, it was the only thing he was good at – he hadn't spent years and years studying chemistry and memorising all of the techniques for nothing – but there was nothing else to be done with his talents. Well, that wasn't strictly true, but he hated kids, so teaching high school chemistry was out of the question. He'd spent years of his life trying to escape academia. Why the hell should he go back when he had been presented with such a prestigious job?

Prestigious it may be, but it certainly wasn't the most… well, moral occupation one could obtain. In fact, it was probably the most evil job out there. Well, aside from kitten decapitation for hire, maybe. He heard that was big in some other countries.

Still, it paid the bills – and then some – so he was quite content with the job. His employers had presented him with quite an appetising offer, to say the least. A lot more money – or "cheddar", as the druggies liked to refer to it by – than he had been given last time. The lion remembered the offer well. Three million dollars for three months of his time. Well, that was nothing compared to what he worked for now.

Ten million per month. His employers could afford it. Several times over, in fact.

The lion couldn't quite understand it. These people had started off as such a small operation, practically scavenging whatever remnants there were of Death's Sumu empire in the desperate hope that they could make some small change from it. However, that small change had evolved into piles and piles and piles and piles and piles of cold hard cash. Mountains of it, in fact. The lion wondered just where the hell they were keeping it. They had to have buried it deep underneath the desert or something. You would need more than a few big barrels to store that kind of money…

The lion reminded himself that he was also being stored away from prying eyes: deep underneath the ground, too. His employers had obviously learned a great deal from Death's drug empire, since this was a much more secluded cook he was running. No one was ever going to find him here – and certainly not the HPD. That was their biggest concern, and it was paramount that the police were rendered unable to discover their operation. Dealers were simple enough to… well, deal with, but cooks were few and far between. Especially when they were looking for Sumu of such a high purity.

The lion could cook ninety-six per cent pure Sumu; that was especially rare. The result of many years of hard work and studying the art of manufacturing such potent and highly illegal drugs those addicts would literally claw at for a small hit or two. They were so pathetic, and yet so easy to trust. No wonder his employers – and him, for that matter – were making so much money. Even with a highly threatening name such as the Family of

Blood. A highly suitable name, given how they seemed to drain the life out of everyone with such bloodsucking qualities…

They had handpicked the lion for being one of Death's former cooks; he knew what he was doing, and he could do it quickly and efficiently. They were willing to pay top dollar for this, leaving him more than willing to accept. He wanted enough money for ten lifetimes; you could never have too much in this world. And he would cook and cook and cook until they told him to stop. Easy.

Sighing, the lion rested against a metallic barrel of methylamine, looking around the darkened lab. It was lit by a couple of fluorescent lighting tubes that dangled from the ceiling by metal chains; that was it as far as illumination was concerned. Not the most comfortable working environment to be present in – but when you were making ten million dollars a month, it seemed like small potatoes. The lion would have prostituted himself for that amount of money. It only served to bring joy to his greedy little heart. If he had a heart, that is. He certainly didn't have a soul. That had disintegrated a long time ago…

He was snapped out of his thoughts as the scratched door to the lab was pushed open, making a slight squeaking noise as it did so. Being underground, this place was very old, and hadn't been kept in such a good condition before the lab had been built here. He had tried his best to maintain a high standard of hygiene, but he wouldn't be surprised if the deepest recesses were still rife with dust and rats.

"Hago – you down here?" called a voice.

Hago whipped round to be confronted with a female cub. He knew her by name, since she visited him once every day to check on how the cook was progressing. The Family of Blood seemed very meticulous.

"What is it, Vitani?" he asked, casting a rather curious glance at her. She had walked in carrying a plush toy of a dog on her back. *That* certainly wasn't an ingredient in his cook. "And what the hell are you wearing?"

"I'm not wearing it," Vitani said sharply, shooting a look towards the expensive lab equipment. "How's the cook going?"

"Same as every day," Hago reported. "I'm halfway through, and on my break."

"Thought so," Vitani said. "I just like to make sure. You know we have a very demanding quota that needs to be adhered to."

"And I'm more than willing to participate," Hago retorted. "Now, what on earth is that toy for? *Scud the Wonder Dog*?"

"We have to be more careful with the money," Vitani said, ripping off the plush toy's head and pulling out several wads of money from its rather roomy insides. "No one's going to expect drug money to be hidden inside the next hit TV character."

"Clever," said Hago, watching as she put the money down on a nearby table. "That's not ten million dollars, though. Where's the rest of it?"

"We'll get it to you some other way," Vitani told him. "I'm sure we can organise a dead drop in the desert. This is just to hold you over for the next couple of days or so."

"Very well," said Hago. "I'm sure I can trust you to—"

Clang!

Both of the animals looked upwards upon hearing the sudden sharp noise. Metal striking metal. If Hago didn't know any better, than he would have thought that it was the sound of a bullet firing from a gun.

"What on earth is that?" Hago asked, staring up at the ceiling. Nothing had gotten into the lab; it had to be coming from a few feet above. "If I didn't know any better, than I would have thought that it was the sound of a bullet firing from a gun."

Vitani just smiled. "We've been having some… problems recently," she explained. "But don't worry. No one's going to find our lab. We're taking care of it."

Clang! Clang! Clang!

"Taking care of it?" said Hago, raising an eyebrow at the repetitive noise.

"Yes," Vitani said. She had the cruellest look in her eyes. "*Permanently*."

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The bullets continued to bounce off the bonnet of the Junk-Mobile, showing no signs of stopping in their intense assault on TPYMK, Sarafina and Bora. The former detective was amazed that they hadn't emptied themselves of ammunition yet; the Family of Blood must have had an enormous ammunitions stockpile as well as reams of cash.

And then, just like that, his prayers were answered.

The deafening sound of the gunfire – which had caused more than a good ringing in his ears by now – at long last ceased, leaving only the sound of the flickering flames that had engulfed the car. Somewhat surprisingly, the fires were of much more concern to TPYMK than that of their hidden assassins.

"Sarafina!" TPYMK cried, his eyes watering from the intensity of the flames. The unpleasant aroma of the smoke wasn't helping much, either; his throat felt raw and the smell was almost more than he could bear. Still, he pressed on. "Sarafina!"

Still nothing. There was not a sound or sight of the lioness who had become trapped in the blaze.

Fearing the worst, he crossed over to the passenger side of the car – practically leaping over the bonnet and almost singing his trenchcoat in the process – before reaching out with his hands and clawing at the door.

But, to the former detective's amazement, it was already open.

"Huh?"

TPYMK stared at the empty passenger seat – the empty car, actually – watching as it combusted before his very eyes. Yet another possession of his had been destroyed as a result of the deadly situations that he so often landed in. It felt like he would never be able to keep anything for more than a few months before it was reduced to dust.

However, he didn't regard Sarafina as a possession, and he had a feeling that she was very much alive.

"Aw, Jesus," Bora said, nursing a wound on his shoulder as he walked over to the side of the car where TPYMK was. The human glanced briefly at the cut, deduced that it wasn't that deep, and was assured that the lion would be fine. For now, at least. "Whoever they were, they tore this hunk to shreds."

"Yes – thank you for stating the obvious," replied TPYMK, craning his neck in the direction of the trees. He pondered on where Sarafina possibly could have fled to. "Now, we'd better get out of here before the car blows sky high."

"Whatever," Bora grunted, evidently not happy that TPYMK was the one giving the orders here. But there wasn't much else he could do; the situation had become very confusing, very quickly. "Where the hell has the girl gone?"

The former detective was slightly surprised that – for once – Bora hadn't called her a whore or a slut or a chambermaid, which was what he normally did on a regular basis. The lion's rude dialogue was an acquired taste. A taste that left a foul sensation in TPYMK's mouth.

"Up in the hills," TPYMK said. Sarafina was a very quick lioness, he thought. She must have become so frightened that she had sprinted away in the chaos just to put as much distance between her and the fire as possible. He imagined that she had to be hiding somewhere nearby; she wouldn't go so far as not to lose TPYMK. They were inseparable by this point.

"Up in the hills, huh?" said Bora, wiping blood from his shoulder and checking to see whether it was still bleeding or not. It wasn't. Luckily, the bullet had just grazed his skin. He was practically unharmed. "How do you know?"

"That's where I'd go," TPYMK replied, trudging up the hills where he thought that Sarafina would be hiding from the chaos. "And I know Sarafina. Trust me on this."

"I trusted you on the Family of Blood hiding out in a shack in the middle of this hellhole," Bora remarked. "And now look what the hell you've done."

"Given you more than enough evidence to put them away for about fifty lifetimes," TPYMK retorted sharply over his shoulder, which he knew would be sufficient enough to shut the lion up for quite some time.

"Well—"

Boom!

Bora was about to try and make a comeback when the Junk-Mobile finally exploded from behind, the two of them flinching at the high volume of the blast. They both turned around to see what remained of the car: a pile of assorted junk. It was virtually unrecognisable by this point.

"Well," said TPYMK, "looks like we're getting a taxi home."

"Tell me you got them," said Zira, combing a paw through the fur on top of her head as she sat at the table. "If I keep getting this much aggravation, then I might need to take another hit or two…"

"Oh, you don't need to do that, Mom," Vitani said, picking up a cloth and finishing up with her cleaning. She would have been done by now if it wasn't for such an… unpleasant interruption. Still, it had been dealt with now, so her normal routine could resume. "I've taken care of it."

"How can you be sure?" Zira asked, her eyes bloodshot as she gazed at her daughter. Resisting the urge to shake her head in disapproval – Vitani knew that her mother had been smoking marijuana again – she simply gave her a kindly smile. "I mean, they could have gotten away at the last minute or something."

"I heard it," Vitani said, thinking that the enormous noise of the gunshots – especially since they could be heard from way down in the lab – was sufficient enough for her to be sure that the intruders were dead and buried. "Right from the lab – and you know how hidden away *that* is."

"You *heard* it?" exclaimed Zira, anger showing in her gaze. "That's no evidence, Vitani. I bet those rats are out there right now, plotting to—"

"Calm down, Mom," said Vitani, patting her mother on the shoulder. "You're getting paranoid again. And besides…" A familiar cruel smile spread across her face. "If they *are* still alive, then you can shoot up their balls with volcanic lava."

"*I'll rip 'em out and shove them where the sun doesn't shine!*" Zira suddenly yelled, trembling with the unexpected burst of anger. "That's the last time they mess with me… the last time…"

Vitani shot a concerned glance towards her mother, knowing that her displays of intense aggression were due to repetitive Sumu use. She thought that her mother was behind her drug problem by now. Obviously, she had miscalculated wildly. "Mom… are you back on it again?" She already knew the answer; she just wanted to know if her mother would be honest with her.

Zira gave her an affectionate smile and a loving pat on the back. "You don't worry about Mommy, dear," she replied. "You just make sure that those rats are dead. You don't want to upset me even more, now, do you?"

"No," said Vitani after a moment of thought, "but I don't want you to end up like Nuka and—"

"*Shut your mouth!*" Zira snapped, baring her teeth at her daughter. "I am nothing like that piece of filth son of mine! *Nothing!* Do you hear me?"

"Y-yes, Mom," stammered Vitani, backing away in fear. She didn't want to become a victim of her mother's anger; she had seen what had happened last time with that rat. She would have beaten that lioness to death if she hadn't stepped in to stop her. The murder of someone working with HPD would only make matters worse. "I'm s-sorry."

Zira's sweet smile returned, as if nothing had even happened. "That's okay, sweetie," she said. She cast a glance at Moto, who still lay unconscious a few feet away from the table; he had revealed the information about the intruders before to Vitani. "Now, why don't you run along and take that idiot out of here? He'd better be dealing within five minutes or I'm gonna ram his junk into a blender and hit 'Purée'."

"Okay, Mom," Vitani said, grabbing Moto by his hind legs and trying to pull him away. Realising this would only take up more time in her busy day – she always had a full schedule with this mighty drug empire – she spotted a glass of water on the table and spilled its contents onto the cub's face. He coughed and spluttered, arousing from his drug-induced sleep.

"Dude – who jizzed on my face? That ain't cool, man," Moto said, wiping the – thankfully pure – liquid from his muzzle. "Oh… it's water. Kinky."

"Get him out of here," Zira said, leaning one of her cheeks on a paw. She was clearly nursing a nasty headache from her last hit of Sumu. "He should be slinging Sumu right now. It's either that or a one-way trip to the testicle grinder."

"Don't worry, Mrs Pussy," Moto said, waving a paw in the air. He seemed to have regained what little composure he had lost earlier. Vitani knew that the cub was using drugs more than ever lately, and had devolved into the world's first drug-addicted zombie. "It's all good when Moto's in the hood. I got mad skills, yo!"

"We've heard it a million times, Moto," Vitani sighed, more tired than ever of the constant atrocities to the English language that the cub kept on spouting. "Now, get out there and make us some money."

"Whatever you say," Moto replied, being ushered towards the corridor by Vitani. "I'll help you with anything. Sell you Sumu, cut your pizza, rat out the rats…" He chuckled, looking over his shoulder. "Hey – did you take care of those ones I told you about before? 'Cause they're, like, always poking around here."

Zira lifted her head up. "Wait."

Both of the cubs stopped. "What is it, Mom?" asked Vitani.

"They're always poking around here?" said Zira, mulling over what Moto has said. "Who are they? When were they here before?"

"I told you, man," Moto said, before looking at Vitani. "Well, I told *this* man, man. Well, she's not really a man, man – she's a woman, which is like man but with a 'wo', man."

"Just tell me who they were," snapped Zira, as she felt her headache growing worse from more of Moto's miserable speaking. "*Exactly* who they were."

"You took care of her before," Moto said. "Sarafina. Remember? She came in here, and you were all like, 'Let's beat the spunk out of her!' and then you punched her until there was, like, no juice left. Total annihilation, yo!"

Zira growled loudly. "I thought she would have learned her lesson last time," she snarled. "That's the last time I go easy on a rat."

"But she's probably dead," Vitani told her.

"Nonsense," said Vitani. "She's alive. I can *smell* it."

Moto sniffed the air. "All I can smell is two hot lionesses."

"You'd better talk to our little security force," Zira instructed Vitani, "and make sure that they bring that lioness to me *alive*. Once we've trapped that little rat for good, HPD are gonna realise that we own this city."

"Yeah!" Moto cried in approval. "Total ownage!"

"I'll take care of it, Mom," Vitani assured her, pushing Moto out of the room.

"You had better," said Zira, placing her head on the table. A faint grin appeared on her face. "Nothing works better than a good rat trap."

"Sarafina!" TPYMK lowered his hands from his mouth, having been using them as a makeshift loudspeaker of sorts in order to try and attract Sarafina to them. It hadn't worked. "Damn it. Where the hell is she?"

Bora stared blankly at the landscape of hills before them, scowling at TPYMK. "It's where you'd go, huh?" he said. The lion was taking every opportunity to insult TPYMK for failing in his efforts to locate Sarafina. "Straight up the hills, eh?"

"Aw, shut up," TPYMK said, carefully stepping back down the hill, sick with worry at the thought of Sarafina being all on her own in the forest. The last time he'd allowed her to go in by herself, she'd come back out with a severely bruised face and a bloodstream full of Sumu. He couldn't bear to think what might happen to her if she was caught again. "We have to find her before sunset."

"Before sunset?" laughed Bora. "What, is that when the druggie burnout werewolves come out to play? And by 'play', I mean shooting Sumu into their balls."

TPYMK ignored the cop, reaching the bottom of the hill and scanning the thousands of trees that stretched on for miles in front of him. Sarafina could be hiding anywhere in the forest – if she hadn't already been captured, that is. He had initially discarded the possibility, owing to the fact that if someone had taken her during the shootout, he would have noticed. However, maybe he had overlooked something in the midst of the commotion. It wasn't likely – he was an incredibly careful person – but it was a possibility.

"Where the hell are you taking me now?" Bora asked. "I might as well go to a phone booth and call in some backup, 'cause you sure as hell ain't getting the Family of Blood after all this."

"Come on," said TPYMK, attempting to play into Bora's prideful personality. The last thing he needed was for the whole of HPD to get involved in this. "Where's your ambition?"

"Ambition?" said Bora. "The only ambition I've got is sending these no-hopers to jail for the rest of those miserable things they call lives."

"It'd be better if you did it on your own, though," said TPYMK, raising his eyebrows at the lion. "*Wouldn't* it? Gee, imagine the enormous amount of respect that would come with catching the Family of Blood all by yourself. That's gotta be worth a pay rise, for sure."

"So you can mooch off of what I earn?" Bora guessed, not the easiest person to be swayed by TPYMK's persuasive manner of speaking. "As if you haven't committed enough felonies already to put your sorry butt in jail for a good number of years."

"I have more than enough money to last me for ever," TPYMK replied. "However, I am saying that it would be in your best interest to hold off on involving the rest of your team in this until later. We still need more evidence."

"Evidence?" Bora could hardly contain his laughter. "You're the one who said we had plenty of that. They blew up your car with a million bullets. If that ain't evidence, then screw me with a long, sharp stick."

"Why accept only evidence when you can have *hard* evidence?" TPYMK responded, glancing back in the direction of the shack they had been surveying earlier. It was about half a mile away from their current position; the former detective had wanted to get a reasonable distance away from any more assailants who might be looking to kill them. "Say… a dealer."

"Beat you to it, jackoff. We've already picked up some of their dealers," Bora said. "They give 'em too much cheese to talk, though. Got tighter mouths than an unwilling asexual."

"Then we'll get someone even better," TPYMK said, heading off into a clump of bushes.

"Like who?" Bora asked as he followed the human.

TPYMK looked over his shoulder. "The cook."

Sarafina hadn't gone up in the hills.

Staying low to the ground – not a particularly hard task for her species, given that, once upon a time, lionesses had hunted for food in the wild – she poked her head just slightly above the tall grass; enough so she could see, but nothing more. The last thing she needed after almost burning to death was to be spotted yet again.

The lioness dug her hind claws into the earth, making sure that she wouldn't slip from the grassy slope she was stood on. *Gonna have to paint these piggies again,* she mused, seeing how scratched and muddy her purple toenails had become. *This little piggy got shot, this little piggy got burned to death… God, I'm bored.*

Upon scarpering from the burning wreck that was once called the Junk-Mobile as fast as her legs could carry her, Sarafina had immediately ducked into the small slope that led down into the clearing where the Family of Blood's seemingly small shack was located. She heard the faint whisper of voices above her over the roaring sound of flames, and was sure that it was TPYMK and that cop, Bora – but she didn't want to risk her chances finding out. In such a deadly situation, anything could happen – and she didn't fancy receiving any more bruises to the face.

Still, she knew that hiding here could give her the one chance – the sole opportunity – she needed in order to help TPYMK with this whole Family of Blood thing. It wasn't nearly as risky as what she had done before, but it still came with a certain element of danger. She would have to be quick, and she would have to be careful.

She knew she could do that.

"Yo! Yo! Yo!"

Sarafina narrowed her eyes at the bottom of the slope, watching as Moto sauntered past in his usual obnoxious way, hopping up and down as he endlessly chanted, "Yo! Yo! Yo!" over and over again.

What is he, a rap star now? The lioness rolled her eyes in annoyance, somewhat disgusted by the fact that her plan hinged on approaching this miserable miscreant. *Gotta do what you gotta do, though...*

Sarafina held her breath and crept silently through the glass, placing each paw carefully so she wouldn't create any rustling noises. Knowing Moto, he was amped out of his mind all hours of the day, so his paranoia could strike without warning. All it would take was one little sound to set him off.

Gritting her teeth, Sarafina arrived at the bottom of the slope, right where she wanted to be: behind Moto as he continued walking away.

Gotcha.

Safe in the knowledge that being silent was no longer necessary, Sarafina let out a cry of determination and, with a great spurt of energy, leapt at Moto and tackled him to the ground. The cub grunted in surprise, amazed to see the lioness pinning him down with her perfectly sharpened claws. Once upon a time, her claws were practically non-existent. Now, however, she was a fully matured lioness – and nothing would stop these babies from tearing this little jerk's throat out if she had to.

"Freeze, jerkoff," Sarafina said, fixing Moto with an angry stare. She hated this cub more than anything, and as much as she would have liked to rip his eyes out from their sockets, she knew that her plan required him to remain alive. "Scream and I'll cut your throat open."

Moto just laughed. "Sarafina!" he exclaimed. "The Purple Pussy! This is such a pleasant surprise! How's it hanging?"

"Shut up," Sarafina snarled, pressing her claws into his skin, drawing blood. The cub moaned quietly in discomfort, obviously not used to this sort of pain. He was a coward, through and through. "You're coming with me."

"Yo, what?" said Moto, as Sarafina dragged him to his paws. "Are we going to the zoo?"

"*There* you are," TPYMK said, hurrying down a small slope when he finally spotted Sarafina. He failed to notice the cub she was dragging at first, but it didn't take him long to see the scumbag in all his worthless glory. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Taking care of business," Sarafina replied, pushing Moto in front of her. He landed facedown in the ground with a *thump!*

Bora glanced down at Moto. "Him again, huh?"

"You see this insane jerkoff here?" Sarafina asked, pulling Moto back to his feet. "He's their best dealer."

"Of course I am!" Moto freely admitted. "I make more cheddar than anyone."

"A confession," Bora noted, looking ever so slightly impressed. "This is good."

"I know what'll be better," Sarafina said. "I've got a plan."

TPYMK's expression changed to one of curiosity. "What kind of plan?"

"We use him," Sarafina said, gesturing to Moto, "to get to them."

Vitani growled loudly at the sight of Sarafina dragging away Moto, anger burning in her chest at the thought of a rat getting away with their best dealer.

"No!" she yelled, watching as they disappeared up the slope. "No, no, no!"

Knowing that she couldn't stop the lioness herself – she wasn't cut out for aggressive combat – Vitani turned tail and headed back towards the shack, knowing that if one person knew what to do in this situation, then it was her mother.

She's not going to be happy, Vitani thought, *but we need anger at a time like this.*

Little did she know that the rat trap had already been placed into position. All they needed was for someone to set it off.

AN: Oh, man – this is getting so tense! TPYMK, Sarafina and Bora have Moto and are gonna use him to try and draw the Family of Blood out. But they're not gonna take this lying down, are they? There's no telling what may happen next. All I can say is that, from here on in, things are going to go downhill *very* quickly.